

The New Media Marketing Strategies of Chinese Low-Budget Art House Films

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Abstract: Marketing is a vital part of the film industry; film marketing uses various methods to let audiences know about a film and then go to the cinema to watch it. Compared with the western film industry, the marketing consciousness in the Chinese film industry started late. Also, due to the relatively special art form, the low-budget art house films always failed to carry out effective marketing with cost restrictions as a result. However, emerging social media offers new opportunities for the marketing of low-budget art house films, which provides filmmakers with a convenient and inexpensive advertising platform. New media film marketing is more and more involved in the whole process of film production and distribution, and it affects the box office results to a great extent. Therefore, the new media film marketing plays an important role in the development of the film industry. The research on how Chinese low-budget art house films use new media for marketing is very useful for the Chinese film industry.

Keywords: Film industry, new media marketing, low-budget films, art house films

1. Introduction

Marketing is an important part of the film industry. In the film industry, compared with high-cost blockbusters, although low-budget films have high production, they occupy a lower box office and face serious domestic difficulty and foreign invasion, so low-budget films are often unable to carry out effective marketing under cost constraints. As a kind of low-budget films, art house films are also facing this kind of problem. Because of their profound ideological pursuit, artistic pursuit and humanistic care, once low-budget art house films find an effective marketing channel, they may compete with blockbusters. Among the many marketing tools that low-budget films attempt to adopt, new media marketing, as an emerging marketing tool, is gradually sought after and respected by many low-budget films because of its low cost, fast dissemination and high interactivity [1]. The rapid development of Chinese films in recent years cannot be separated from the growing popularity of film marketing. The new media as an important part of film marketing, directly impacts the box office and reputation of the film. Current film marketing cannot be separated from the support of the new media, which is a powerful communication resource. Therefore, the new media film marketing plays an important role in the development of the film industry. The research on how Chinese low-budget art house films use new media for marketing is very useful for the Chinese film industry.

In this essay, firstly, the marketing background of low-budget art house films will be introduced, then the new media marketing strategies of Chinese low-budget art house films will be analyzed with the case studies of *Song of the Phoenix* and *Golden Age*.

2. Introduction of the marketing background of low-budget art house films

The concept of ‘art house film’ was proposed by the French in the early 20th century to counter the commercial films of Hollywood [2]. It usually refers to films with a certain depth of thought, artistic pursuit and humanistic concern. Art films are often accompanied by the creators’ distinctive personal style and emotions, and they do not see the box office profits as their highest goal. Art films usually focus on criticizing social reality, expressing people’s inner feelings and digging the depths of human nature. They are more ideological and less entertaining, and they are relative to commercial films. Therefore, the audience groups are comparatively small. The performance of an art house film is often regarded as a ‘box office flop’, they often struggle as the castle in the air, even if they achieve high praise, but do not necessarily acquire the high box office takings.

In recent years, the production and quality of Chinese commercial films have been greatly improved. The number of screens in China reached a total of 46000 blocks in 2016 [3] and China has become the world's largest film screening country [4]. In 2016 alone, there were ten films at the box office that earned over 1 billion Yuan, of which Chinese domestic films accounted for six. While Chinese commercial films are flourishing, the art house films are not lucky. For a long time, the domestic screen has been dominated by mainstream commercial films, which have won high box office ratings and shared most of the market share of domestic films. Especially with the development of film industrialization, a great number of commercial blockbusters with high investment have become a guarantee of success at the box office. In this market environment, a few art film creators still adhere to their own creative ideals and the pursuit of art in the fierce market competition, but art films find it difficult to break out of the vicious cycle between artistic quality and the failure at the box office, and they have been in a difficult position for a long time [5], both output and box office prices still being low, reflecting the potential imbalance between commercial films and art house films in the Chinese film industry, as well as the general shrinking of art house films. Chinese art house films need some corresponding marketing strategies to eliminate the current embarrassing situation and living environment. The main problems of Chinese art house film marketing are a lack of hot topics, they do not pay enough attention to the overseas market and single marketing methods, and are short of innovative thinking in the application of new media. Therefore, Chinese art films need more efforts to find their own living space in the competition with commercial blockbusters.

3. Introduction of New Media in Film Marketing

With the continuous development of information communication technology, the new media is rising rapidly. The channels of people to obtain information and the communication tools between people have gradually turned to new media on the Internet that are more convenient and efficient. The new media is the interactive media of digital and the internet. Its core characteristics are strong interactivity, low cost of communication, super text form, fast and efficient, and these advantages ensure it become the best marketing platform for low-budget films. Film marketing communication on the new media platform cannot simply copy the traditional method of publicity and promotion; it should be innovative marketing that is based on the individual characteristics of the media. Through analyze the three case studies, there are three main film marketing methods that are based on new media platforms: official website, social media and mobile phone applications, which may become the most common film marketing methods in the future.

3.1. Official website

To establish the official website is the conventional means of contemporary film, but because of the lack of user base and the high cost, its spreading effect is not very effective, so seeking cooperation with various professional websites is the best choice for low-budget films for Internet publicity. At present, there are three kinds of Chinese website for low-budget films to carry out their marketing. The first is the news portal website with film and television channels and entertainment channels, such as *Sina*, *NetEase* and *Sohu*. They have the highest number of users, followed by professional film websites, such as *Mtime* and *Douban*. The users in these professional film review websites that have gathered many film fans are similar to the audiences who often go to the cinema to watch films. As a result, some film marketing teams have established official websites on *film.douban.com* or launched promotional videos and interactive games on *Mtime.com*, both of which are cost-effective publicity methods. Another one is online video sites, such as *Youku*, *Iqiyi* and *Tencent* that mainly produce videos; the film marketing team can put trailers and scenes on these. Recently, there are numerous of online fascinating entertainment programs on these video websites. Compared with the traditional media entertainment, they are more convenient and cheaper, and they could also be important platforms for low-budget films to use for publicity.

The low-budget films can also cooperate with e-commerce websites, such as *Taobao*, *Tmall*, *Jingdong*, *Meituan* and *Dianping*, which are popular e-commerce websites in China. The mode of electronic ticket sales in China has already developed maturely; low-budget films can promote film tickets through business cooperation to use these various well-known e-commerce platforms.

3.2. Social media

SNS (Social Network Service) is the social online service, which has been accepted by Chinese

Internet users in recent years. As a new customer generated media, the social media have a broad coverage user network, inherent interactivity, authenticity and massive user generated content, which is very suitable for low-budget films to target precise audience marketing, interactive marketing and word-of-mouth marketing. The film marketing team can observe the audience's acceptance, attention and feedback of the film in real time in these social media, so as to facilitate the dynamic revision of the publicity information. As mentioned previously, microblog is the most popular social media, in addition, *Renren*, whose main users are students, *Kaixin* whose main users are white-collar workers, *QQ* for users of all ages and *Douban* whose users are mainly film fans, are common popular Chinese social media.

3.3. Mobile applications

With the explosive growth of mobile phones, tablet PCs and other platforms that are based on mobile applications. Mobile new media has become the most widely used tool for people to receive information or convey information. By contrast, traditional Internet media users are losing ground. Mobile phone applications rely on the portability and vertical transmission of themselves, so that the information that is transmitted to the target audience can be reached quickly. WeChat, Cat's eye, Guevara and other mobile applications are the main mobile applications for film marketing in China. The increasingly mature online film ticketing mobile phone applications should be the first choice for low-budget films to sell their tickets, for example, *Breakup Buddies*, a film directed by Ning Hao, cooperated with the *Cat's eye* application. *Cat's eye* is solely responsible for the ticket marketing of this film, and jointly launched a variety of low-cost ticketing and lottery ticket activities. This ticket marketing method that is based on mobile phones fits the ticket-buying habits of current consumers, and it helped this film set a record at the box office, breaking 100 million Yuan in three days in the Chinese film industry.

4. Case study

4.1. The Microblog Marketing of *Song of the Phoenix*

In the situation with row piece rate, the producer of *Song of the Phoenix*, Fang Li, knelt down in front of the audience and film cinema to appeal to more film schedules for this film in the live-broadcasting platform of microblog. This behavior quickly spread attention in social media, especially microblogs, sparking a hot showing in the film market. It had an unexpected marketing effect.

Song of the Phoenix is the legacy of Chinese fourth generation director Wu Tianming. This film hadn't been showing due to the lack of funds before the director Wu Tianming passed away. It was finally released on 6th May, 2016, and in total it achieved about 3 million Yuan at the box office in the first seven days. Meanwhile, *Captain America: Civil War*, a blockbuster released almost at the same time as it, achieved 140 million Yuan at the box office in one week after it was released [6].

On the evening of 12th May, Fang Li described his experience of *Song of the Phoenix*'s marketing in a microblog broadcast platform and said to the theatre managers: "There are 50 weeks in a year that you can make money, and if you can arrange a primetime screening this weekend, I'm willing to kneel down for you and all the friends who help us". Then he knelt down in front of the audiences and said: "I hope everyone can help promote *Song of the Phoenix* on your social media. I do not expect high box office earnings for this film. I hope more people can see Wu Tianming's last masterpiece. This is a Chinese film and Chinese culture. People don't only live for money".

After Fang Li knelt down to appeal in the broadcast, the row piece of *Song of the Phoenix* from the original 1% to 7.4% or more, attendance was as high as 36% [7]. There was a growing number of discussions about this film. The new media spread result about this film can be seen as a miracle for low-budget art house films, from the first released a week that merely gained 1% row piece, the film box office was only 3 million Yuan, after the 'kneeling down' incident, the one-day box office broke 8 million Yuan quickly, and eventually the box office saw more than 86 million Yuan.

This film found it hard to find a company to distribute it for a long time and due to the long sparing of time, this film did not even have posters, trailers or a theme soundtrack, so the marketing team had to quickly finish it. Another problem was the lack of publicity fee. However, when so many difficulties exist, the box office of *Song of the Phoenix* eventually achieved a higher return than previous art films at the box office, and achieved an effective marketing effect, through the 'kneel down' marketing strategies in microblog which may only be fit for this film, but with the help of microblogging and the spread in other new media platforms, this is a useful method. Art house film even all low-budget films cannot

ignore the power of marketing in social media.

4.2. The Internet Marketing Strategies of *Golden Age*

With the rapid development of the Internet and information technology, the promotion of films through the Internet has become a common marketing method in the film industry. The relationship between films and the Internet is closer, and alongside trailers, the scene tidbits, press conferences, and even the public opinion, the first channel for transfer film information is the Internet. How to innovate Internet marketing tools and attract more audience attention is a difficult problem for film companies. There are a few films that focus on art rather than on commercial value. *Golden Age*, directed by Xu Anhua, was released in this background, with the ambition of large tracts of art launched on the Internet with in-depth marketing and innovation techniques, but the road has been deviated from, and it did not achieve the desired results.

On 19th April, 2015, *Golden Age* won the Hong Kong Film Award for best film. This art film achieved only 50 million Yuan at the box office, although it had a high score of 7.1 on Douban.com. The new media marketing methods of *Golden Age* created a powerful combination of precedent with Baidu, Tencent and Youku, these three popular websites participated in the film production, and they also gave strong support in the cyberspace. Although this new model failed, it is also a typical example of the development of new media marketing.

Baidu, through the cooperation with *Golden Age* to lay out the Internet banking, made this film an Internet product. They created a new marketing model of Internet financial investment combined with consumption of the film: every film audience member could use the Internet to give an investment to *Golden Age* and may attain profit according to a specific calculation method [8]. This cooperation, from the theoretical point of view, is a win-win marketing mode. The film became the springboard for Baidu to enter the Internet banking, and the film could also take advantage of Baidu's influence, enhancing Internet media attributes of the film, achieving an in-depth marketing effect. Tencent teamed up with *Golden Age* to create a way of exchanging WeChat and film resources, and WeChat's wallet tried to give the film success marketing. According to the cooperation agreement, WeChat's wallet launched an online booking platform with this powerful ally and had a high degree of concern for the film [9]. There were many tickets to attract mobile users in WeChat, to improve user viscosity and expand access to the WeChat field, and the film could also use Tencent's resources to carry out more in-depth marketing promotion. When Youku teamed up with *Golden Age*, they were directly involved in the production of the film. This joint marketing model enabled the film to gain more Internet resources in the first place. For example, video website homepage recommendations and purchase page, provided the necessary resources and marketing platform for the film [10]. In the fierce competition under the background of the video site, Youku improved the industrial layout level, to invest in the film. Internet film has become the strategic objective and the cooperation with *Golden Age* is the first attempt of Youku to invest films [11].

Golden Age did not change its Internet reputation and success at the box office, which was unexpected. There are three reasons for its marketing failure. Firstly, the publicity costs were low. It only relies on the three popular websites, but this is not the main reason. The second is its Internet marketing methods were too pioneering, the film in the Internet marketing has too many innovations, but it needs time to ensure the audience accept it. The third reason is the film's narrative method led too many audiences to be personalized. It is very difficult to support the process of the in-depth Internet marketing, in the era of 'content is king', it did not cater to the general public and it found it difficult to succeed, which is probably the biggest factor in this film's marketing deviation. *Golden Age*, with the Internet, opened up a new method of film marketing, but in the pursuit of box office figures under the premise, the lack of support, resulting in marketing dislocation, triggered a rebellious high expectation of the audience. Perhaps this kind of marketing dislocation is the malpractice of the popularization of most art films in China, and it is difficult for films to succeed only by innovative experimental marketing methods.

In China, because of the lack of art film theatre chains, the operation of art films has been in an awkward situation, and they have to go with commercial films to grab the schedules and achieved box office. That is to say, art films can only be operated according to the marketing model of commercial films. The new media Internet marketing of *Golden Age* is an innovation, to provide some reference for the film market, including the cooperation of Internet companies, the rallying point of famous directors and famous stars, making full use of cyberspace, but the real successful impact is the positioning of video content and the audience, especially in the rapid development of the new media marketing, the preferences of the audience, the films need to meet the audience tastes, which is a way of developing new media marketing.

5. Conclusion

The new media marketing is a booming method in film industry, and current film publicity cannot leave it. These two films are typical case in the marketing field. Whether it achieved high box office, its marketing strategies all worth to reference for low-budget art house films to compete with the blockbusters. The art house film did not achieve the superior performance than romance comedies, but it begin to marketing complete with commercial films. *Song of the Phoenix* is benefit by the spread of microblog, and although *Golden Age* did not achieve high box office, it exploits a new way for Internet marketing. The arrival of the new media era has brought both opportunities and challenges to Chinese film marketing. Chinese film producers need a sense of innovation and an open mind, to break away from the traditional thinking, to adapt to the new media era that the audience needs, to recognize the enormous value of new media.

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